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ABSTRACT

Results from a diverse selection of public opinion polls, most conducted by Gallup, taken from 1954 to 1984 reveal Americans' long-term concern about discipline in public schools. Since 1969, in every year but one, discipline has been considered the biggest problem facing schools by at least a quarter of the respondents. One in four surveyed views discipline as a continuing and fairly serious problem which affects the quality of education. Respondents make a distinction between crime in schools and their concern for the maintenance of an orderly environment in which to learn, characterized by mutual respect between the adults and the students. Most feel the problem stems from lack of discipline in the home and lack of respect for law and authority throughout society. A substantial portion of the public believe discipline problems should be dealt with by a combination of school and parents, and, in some instances, the courts also. Teacher opinion polls show that problems of discipline and violence have been declining over the last few years. (PS)

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RESEARCH

Discipline in the Schools

Three Decades of Public Opinion Polling

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NEA RESEARCH

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Foreword

Discipline in the Schools is the third of a series of SEARCH titles geared to examining public thought and reaction to issues related to education. Through these publications, NEA intends to focus attention on the importance of context to public policymakers. We believe it is important for leaders—as background to their decision-making roles—to become thoroughly familiar with citizens' thoughts and beliefs on the subject at hand. As the late George Gallup stated in *The Sophisticated Poll Watcher's Guide*, "It is not incumbent on a leader, even in a democracy, to follow the wishes of the people slavishly. But the very nature of democracy makes it imperative that public opinion be taken into account in reaching decisions about legislative goals."

Over the past half century, opinion polling has gradually established credibility as a valid measure of public attitudes. Through the application of statistical techniques, we can say, with confidence, what the public attitude is on policy questions asked in a poll.

This publication is based on results from a diverse selection of national public opinion polls taken over the past 30 years. We have analyzed these results, drawn inferences, and reported the implications we see for the future. The production of the series was coordinated by Nancy Greenberg of the Research Surveys staff.

Gary Watts
Assistant Executive Director
Professional & Organizational Development

W. Frank Masters, Jr.
Director of Research

June 1985

Each of the publications in this SEARCH mini-series on historical perspectives of public polling has been punched for a three-ring notebook. These booklets thus may be filed together for ready reference.

Preview

Some 2400 years ago the men of Athens were much concerned about the discussions being held daily by Socrates. His classes were characterized, it seemed, by a shameful lack of discipline; and the young students were being encouraged to question the wisdom of their elders. This was probably not the first time that citizens worried about the discipline in their children's schools, and it was certainly not the last. However, until the advent of scientific opinion polling about 50 years ago, it was impossible to assess accurately the extent of people's concern about the problem.

During the 1950s, the Gallup Poll twice included questions on school discipline. In 1954, respondents were asked:

Do you think discipline in most schools today is too strict or not strict enough?

Only 2 percent of the population felt that discipline was too strict; fully 65 percent felt that it was not strict enough. Another 25 percent volunteered the opinion, not offered as an option in the original question, that school discipline was "about right," and the remaining 8 percent had no opinion.

Three years later, in 1957, the Gallup Poll asked:

Do you think teachers should be permitted to discipline their students more strictly than they do at present, or not?

Seventy percent of the respondents said yes, 20 percent said no, and 10 percent had no opinion on the question.

In view of the continuing level of concern about discipline in the public schools, these figures from the 1950s are somewhat tantalizing today, as they do so little to reveal the public attitudes of 30 years ago toward the full range of school discipline issues. Nevertheless, they do give some indication of the climate of public opinion on the general question of public school discipline as the nation entered the 1960s.

Accurately measuring the attitudes of the public requires that a representative sample of respondents be selected at random. This sample must be chosen in a way that allows each member of the total group an equal chance of being selected to take part in the survey. Other important factors to consider are questionnaire design and administration.

The credibility of scientific public opinion polling is well established. What is frequently lost or overlooked is the context of the times in which polls are conducted. Events at the time the question is posed, the wording of the question itself, and the knowledge level and circumstances of the respondents—all constitute information essential to the proper interpretation of public opinion. It is within such an overall context of interpretation that the public's views about school discipline are examined here.

The Sixties and Beyond: A Time of Turbulence

Early in the decade, in 1961, the Gallup Organization conducted for NEA a survey of a national sample of adults to learn "some aspects of the public's attitudes toward education in the United States." At that time, 55 percent of all people interviewed believed that children then in public schools were receiving a better education than they themselves had received. The most frequently mentioned reasons for their belief were that a greater variety of subjects was being taught and teachers were better. About one person in five (21%) thought that public school education was worse, largely because children were not learning the fundamentals as well. When shown a list of things that might be done to improve education and asked which of them were most needed, the interviewees responded as follows:

	Percent
Better discipline among the pupils	45
Classes with fewer children	44
More attention to important subjects	41
More specialists for guiding and counseling children	35
Higher salaries for teachers	31
Better teaching methods	29
Better teachers	26
More school buildings	25
More school equipment and supplies	16
A greater variety of courses of study	10

Thus, out of 10 suggestions on possible ways to improve public school education, nearly half of the respondents chose the alternative "better discipline."

During the 1960s, several factors began to reshape the educational landscape. Desegregation—which affected many segments of our national life, but particularly education—was finally beginning to occur in a substantive way. By the end of the decade, Americans also began to question their national institutions—from government to churches to schools—in an unprecedented fashion. In short, the decade was something of a turning point, a time for serious reassessment of personal and national goals. Change was occurring at a dizzying rate, and the schools' job of preparing young people for adult life was changing drastically.

In the 1970s the nation was to live through "Watergate" and "Vietnam," words that would come to symbolize an era of disillusion, dissent, and discontent. Social structures were to be increasingly fragmented by divorce, poverty, and diminishing reliance on the extended family. Media attention would first focus on widespread school violence and vandalism during that decade, resulting in several calls for governmental remedies, including legislation that would provide federal assistance to local school systems to fight crime.

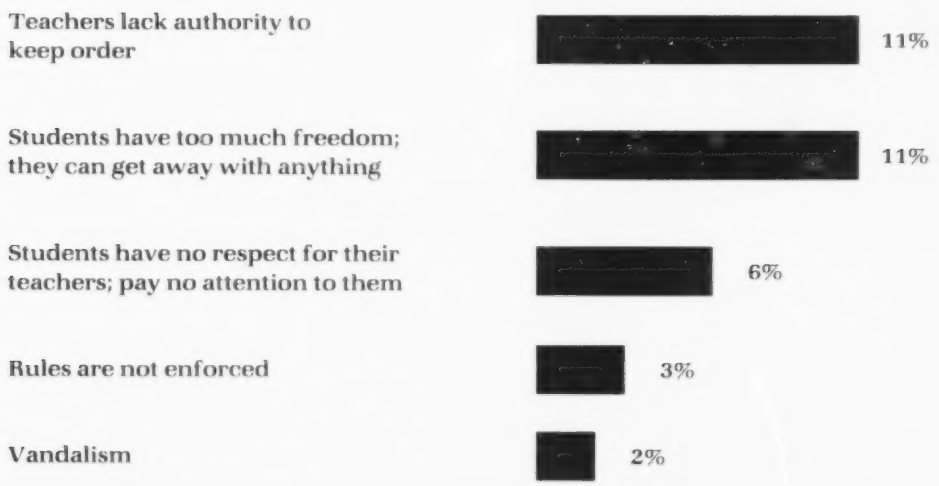
In-Depth Gallup Polls 1969-1984

The public's view of discipline in the nation's public schools became easier to assess after 1969, when the Gallup Organization in conjunction with Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), the education honor society, initiated annual national surveys of public attitudes on education. These polls have become the major source for evaluation of linear trends in public opinion about education issues and have, as a result, substantially influenced public policy.

Discipline Defined

Perhaps because of the widely reported rise in real violence in schools, the phrase "discipline in the schools" has taken on a variety of meanings. It seems capable of covering almost anything from traditional dress codes to arson. In 1971, therefore, the Gallup/PDK survey asked the 48 percent of respondents who said that discipline in the schools was not strict enough to explain what they meant. Their answers fell into categories shown below.

WHAT RESPONDENTS MEAN IN SAYING DISCIPLINE IS NOT STRICT ENOUGH*



SOURCE: Gallup/PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1971.

*Additional breakouts of the 48% who gave this answer.

In the 1973 survey, the Gallup researchers asked all respondents this question:

> *When we talk about "discipline" in the schools, just what does this mean to you?*

They received answers like these:

> *"Discipline is respect for the teacher on the part of the child; and respect for the child on the part of the teacher."*
>
> *"Learning taking place without confusion."*
>
> *"Keeping children so interested in what they are learning that obeying the rules is almost automatic."*
>
> *"Discipline is self-control and a proper respect for other students, for those in authority."*

As the *Phi Delta Kappan* summarized the findings,

> *Most respondents see discipline as a matter of obeying rules, respecting views of parents, teachers, and others in authority, and being considerate of fellow students who wish to learn in a peaceful atmosphere.*

These responses indicate that the public has a fairly general view of the word "discipline" and does not think solely in terms of violence and vandalism. In reviewing the other findings of public opinion polls, it will be essential to keep in mind this distinction between ordinary discipline problems and crime in the schools.

The "Biggest Problem"

Each year since 1969, the Gallup/PDK poll has included this question:

> *What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?*

The results of the 16 surveys have been remarkably consistent: in every year but one, discipline was cited as the biggest problem facing the public schools.

In 1969, the first year in which the survey was conducted, 26 percent of the adults interviewed identified discipline as the top problem facing their local public schools. When asked about the discipline in their local schools, 49 percent said that it was not strict enough, and only 44 percent felt that it was "just about right."

The following year, 1970, discipline was again first, called a major problem by 18 percent of the adults surveyed and by 17 percent of the high school juniors and seniors. However, the number of adults who considered the discipline in their local schools to be not strict enough had risen to 53 percent, and only 31 percent said that it was "just about right." High school juniors and seniors, perhaps not surprisingly, had a different viewpoint: 60 percent felt that things were "just about right," and 15 percent said that discipline was too strict. Still, nearly one-quarter, or 23 percent, said that discipline was not strict enough.

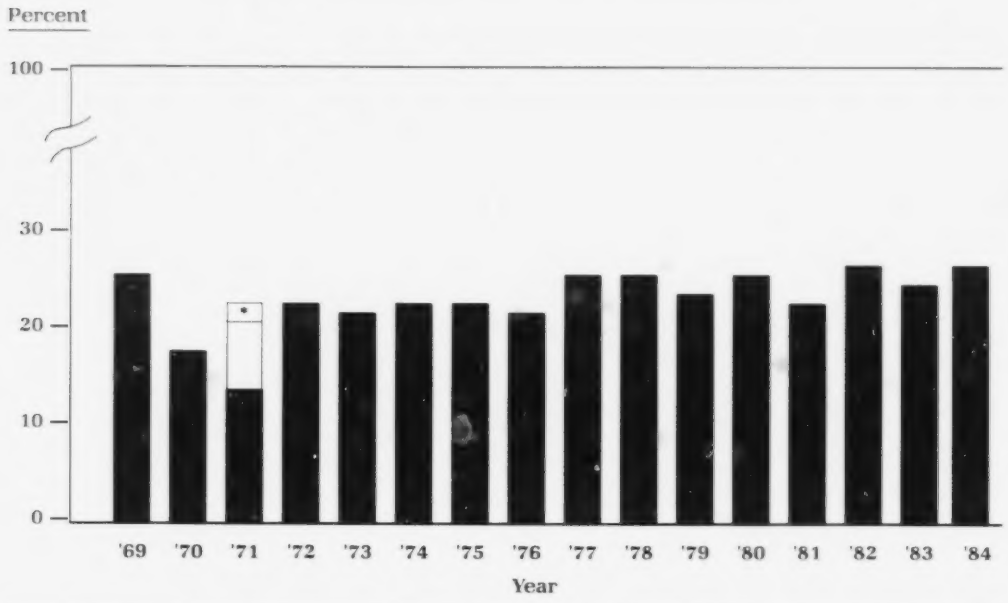
In the third year of the Gallup/PDK survey, 1971, discipline was considered third in importance among the problems troubling local schools. Only 14 percent of the adults surveyed mentioned it, compared with the 23 percent and the 21 percent who mentioned finances and integration problems, respectively. On the strictness question, there had been very little change from the previous year. In de-

scribing this section of the survey, the *Phi Delta Kappan* struck a hopeful note:

> *Discipline has dropped from first place in 1970 and 1969 to third place in 1971 as a major problem. Undoubtedly the change in the attitude of students on college campuses during this year finds its parallel in the local schools. Also, ... there is evidence that discipline has been tightened in the public schools, just as it has been in the colleges and universities.*

As the 1972 Gallup/PDK survey was to prove, however, this optimism was misplaced. In that year discipline returned to first place among the problems that respondents felt faced their local schools, and it has remained in first place ever since. About 23 percent of the people surveyed identified discipline as a problem, and that, too, has remained almost constant for the last 14 years: the numbers ranged from a low of 22 percent in 1973 and 1976 to a high of 27 percent in 1982 and 1984.

PERCENT OF PUBLIC NAMING DISCIPLINE AS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM SCHOOLS FACE



SOURCE: Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Polls of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1969 through 1984.

*In 1971, discipline was seen as the third biggest problem. Finances and integration problems were in first and second places, respectively. See the top of this page for speculation on the reason for this drop.

Other Aspects of the Public's Concern

The perceived problem of discipline in the public schools continued to surface in responses to other questions posed by the Gallup interviewers. In 1976, for example, respondents were asked

> *Which of these ways do you think would do most to* ***improve*** *the quality of public school education overall?*

Respondents were permitted to choose as many answers as they wished from a card listing a dozen suggestions. Fully 51 percent urged greater attention to teaching of basic skills, and virtually as many—50 percent—chose the suggestion to "enforce stricter discipline." When asked to describe the ideal teacher, the 1976 respondents gave high priority to the teacher's "ability to discipline, be firm and fair." These same respondents even expressed a willingness to act on their concerns: for a question about citizen advisory committees to the public schools, 90 percent expressed a willingness to serve on such committees, and of those, 47 percent selected "Discipline and related problems" as a committee on which they would like to serve.

In 1978, in addition to the usual question about the biggest problems facing the local public schools, the Gallup interviewers asked the following open question:

> *What, if anything, do you think the public schools in this community should be doing that they are not doing now?*

Their responses fell into seven main categories—better teachers, back to basics, higher academic standards, and so forth. But at the top of the list was "More strict discipline." The *Phi Delta Kappan* summarized the respondents' comments:

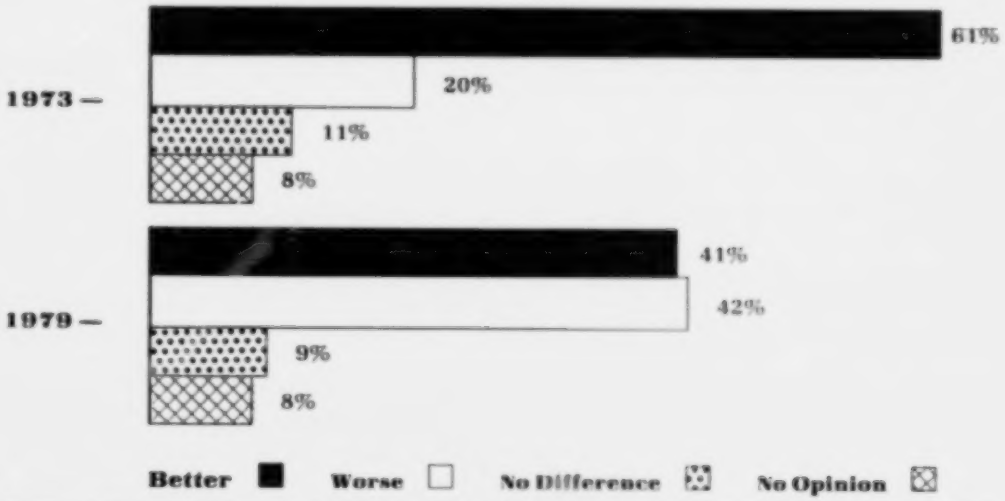
> *The public is bothered by the lack of respect shown to, or demanded by, teachers. They read about the chaos in classrooms. They complain that teachers let children do anything they wish, dress any way they want, pay no attention to school rules, stay away from school whenever they feel like it.*

In 1973, adults had been asked whether education today is better or worse than the education they themselves received. A majority of 61 percent felt that today's children receive a better education. The 20 percent who felt that today's education is worse offered the following reasons for this view:

1. Less discipline
2. Lower education standards and requirements
3. Less interest on the part of students
4. Less interest on the part of teachers
5. Too many irrelevant subjects offered

When the same question was asked again in 1979, only 41 percent of the people felt that schools are better today. The number of those who felt they are worse had increased to 42 percent.

"DO CHILDREN TODAY GET A BETTER—OR WORSE—
EDUCATION THAN YOU DID?"



SOURCE: Gallup/Phi Delta Kappa Polls of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 1973 and 1979.

Other questions asked in 1979 involved what parents liked and disliked about their child's school and how respondents would characterize the ideal school. Parents liked good teachers, high academic standards, special programs, and discipline at their child's school, in that order. The things parents liked least about a child's school, again in order of frequency, were lack of discipline, low academic standards, teachers, condition of the school building, overcrowding, the distance between home and school and the necessity to bus children, and the occurrence of vandalism and of drug and alcohol use by students. It could be inferred from these replies that when parents perceive school discipline as being good, they appreciate it; when they perceive it as being poor, that issue takes precedence over all other quality-of-education concerns. On the question of the ideal school, the 1979 respondents said that such an institution would have, first, marvelous teachers, and second, strict discipline: "Specific rules of behavior should be agreed upon by the school and by parents and then should be rigorously applied."

Origins of the Problem

The picture that emerges from the 16 Gallup/PDK surveys, then, is that about one adult in four across the nation views discipline in the public schools as a continuing and fairly serious problem. What has caused this problem and how it can be remedied are questions that are also, to a certain extent, illuminated by the polls.

In 1983, the Gallup/PDK survey attempted to find out who or what is chiefly to blame for the lack of discipline that the public says is a major problem in the local public schools. A card listing 11 possible reasons for a lack of discipline was handed to each interviewee, and the following question was asked:

> *Many people say that discipline is one of the major problems of the public schools today. Would you please look over this list and tell me which reasons you think are most important to explain why there is a discipline problem?*

The percentage of people choosing each of the 11 reasons was as follows:

	Percent
Lack of discipline in the home	72
Lack of respect for law and authority throughout society	54
Students who are constant troublemakers often can't be removed from school	42
Some teachers are not properly trained to deal with discipline problems	42
The courts have made school administrators so cautious that they don't deal severely with student misbehavior	41
Viewing television programs that emphasize crime and violence	39
Punishment is too lenient	39
Decline in the teaching of good manners	37
Teachers themselves do not command respect	36
Failure on the part of teachers to make classroom work more interesting	31
One-parent families	26

In Search of Solutions

It is one thing to lament the condition of discipline in the public schools, and entirely another to know what should be done about it. In 1970, the Gallup/PDK poll asked a further question of those respondents (53%) who said that discipline was "not strict enough":

> *Who should assume more responsibility for correcting this situation?*

A plurality of these adults (38%) said that the school—teachers, school administrators, school board—should handle the problem. Slightly fewer adults (30%) assigned the responsibility to the parents.

Another question concerned corporal punishment:

> *Spanking and similar forms of physical punishment are permitted in the lower grades of some schools for children who do not respond to other forms of discipline. Do you approve or disapprove of this practice?*

Of all adults surveyed, two-thirds either approved or had no opinion. Only one-third expressed disapproval of the practice. High school juniors and seniors were somewhat more unlikely to approve of the practice.

In 1974, the Gallup/PDK survey attempted to assess community attitudes on punishment by asking the following question:

> *What should be done with a high school student who refuses to obey his teachers?*

The courses of action that won most support among adults were to suspend or expel such students (31%), involve their parents (22%), and counsel them (13%). Also mentioned were to "punish" such students (11%) and to paddle them (7%), to provide special curricula or teachers (10%), and to have discussions with the principal, teachers, and juvenile authorities (8%).

In one other year's survey—1980's—respondents were asked who they thought should deal with certain kinds of student behavior problems—the parents, the school, or the courts. Parents, they said, should deal with truancy, and the courts with vandalism of school property and bringing weapons to school. They left to the school primary responsibility for handling fighting in school, using alcohol or drugs on school property, striking a teacher, and stealing money or clothing from other students. However, the answers were not as clear-cut as they appear in summary. According to the *Phi Delta Kappan*, "The original data show that a substantial portion of the public believes most of these problems should be dealt with by a combination of school and parents, and in some instances by the courts also."

On the school discipline question, there is one other school of thought whose position deserves mention. Its adherents take a preventive stance toward the problem. According to the 1971 Gallup/PDK survey, "the public ... is strongly of the opinion that 'if the schools and the teachers interest the children in learning, most disciplinary problems disappear.' "

Other Polls: 1978-1983

NEA's Quality of Education Survey—1978

Three central factors lie behind public misgivings about the quality of education: the need for more discipline, a lack of parental interest, and insufficient attention to the "basics." NEA's national opinion survey on the quality of education (published in 1979) asked respondents to select from a list those items that they felt best explained "why the quality of education in this country is not better today." Here are the results, listed with the percent of respondents selecting each answer:

	Percent
Problems of discipline and order	57
Parents' lack of interest	40
Not enough emphasis on teaching basic skills	35
Breakdown of respect for hard work and excellence in this country	33
Poor communication between parents and teachers	25
Poor teachers	18
Lack of financial support	15
Poor school administration	13
Poor government policies toward education	11
Poor school facilities	5
Don't know	6

These findings differ slightly in emphasis from those of the Gallup/PDK poll of the same year, 1978. The Gallup responses confirmed the importance of discipline and school curriculum; they differed, however, by registering less concern about lack of parental interest (4%) and more concern about the quality of teachers (9%). These differences in results may be explained by the fact that the NEA study gave respondents a card listing 10 reasons that the quality of education was not higher, and the Gallup/PDK survey presented no alternatives but solicited an open response. The value of the NEA findings is that respondents were able to weigh the importance of the various reasons presented to them.

Whereas the problems of discipline and order were cited most frequently in the NEA poll as the reason the quality of education today was not rated higher, lack of discipline in the school was mentioned least often as a reason the respondents themselves did not get a better education (11%). Instead, most respondents (41%) chose "more self-discipline on my part" as the item that would have led to their getting a better education.

And, finally, in the 1978 survey, the overwhelming majority of Americans (69%) felt that the job of the public schoolteacher was becoming tougher than in past years. Twenty-one percent of the respondents felt that "too much time spent on discipline" was one of the most serious problems teachers faced. Other problems cited were "lack of support from parents" (55%), "children who don't want to learn" (52%), and "too large classes" (41%)—all of which may be considered part of the problem of classroom discipline.

CBS-New York Times Survey—1978

A study by CBS and the *New York Times* in August 1978 also revealed public concern about discipline in schools and about lack of parental interest. Replying to the question "Do you think discipline in schools today is too strict, or not strict enough?", 84 percent of respondents said that more discipline was needed. This group was then asked the follow-up question, "Who do you think is most to blame for discipline not being strict enough?" Parents were blamed three times more often than school officials or teachers for the lack of discipline. Fewer than one respondent in five blamed teachers.

New York Times Survey—1983

In 1983, a poll conducted for the *New York Times* found the nation evenly divided on whether public schools are better or worse than they used to be, with sharp regional differences of opinion. Thirty-six percent of the respondents said schools are "better" now than when they went to school, and 36% said "worse." In the South and Middle West, by clear margins, people think education is better today. In the West and the Northeast, on the other hand, most people feel that schools have gotten worse.

People who think the schools are better now believe that the greatest problems facing schools today are the lack of money and the impact of drugs and alcohol. Those who think schools are worse now believe that inadequate teachers and discipline are the major difficulties today. Schools are considered to be doing the best jobs with extracurricular activities and sports, and worst in maintaining discipline and preparing non-college-bound students for jobs.

The Problem in Perspective

For 15 of the last 16 years, the public has said that it considers discipline to be the biggest problem facing the nation's public schools. Does the public indeed have a reason to worry? Is discipline in the schools really in such a sorry state?

Once again, it is important to recall that the adults who responded to the several polls generally used the term "discipline" to denote a school atmosphere of peaceful purposefulness and of respect between adults and students that would allow learning to take place. Whether or not such an atmosphere exists in most of the nation's schools would be impossible to determine statistically, as it is far too subjective a concept.

The instances of real crime—vandalism, assault, theft—in schools also contribute to the public's concern about school discipline, if only because they receive a fair amount of attention in the media. Yet even they are very difficult to count. School psychologists Irwin A. Hyman and John D'Alessandro point out in a recent article (1984) that all crime is underreported; that data on crimes cannot be reliably compared when the questions that elicited them are worded differently or cover different time periods; and that *who* is responsible for reporting crimes may affect *how* and even *whether* they are reported. Bearing in mind these problems, what can be deduced from the available statistics on school crime?

The principal source of information on school crime is the Safe School Study prepared by the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1978 in response to a mandate from Congress. In this massive study, researchers collected and analyzed data from secondary schools all over the country and used them to establish the dimensions of the school violence problem and to identify

trends. According to the study's published report, the data indicated that assaults on teachers had increased between 1956 and 1974 but had then leveled off; robberies and assaults had increased during the early 1970s; and vandalism had increased during the mid-1960s but had also leveled off by about 1971. The researchers concluded: "For the offenses usually summed up in the terms violence and vandalism, the data from these studies do not give evidence that the situation is currently growing worse" (NIE, 1978, p. 35).

No similarly large-scale studies on school crime have been conducted since the Safe School Study was published. However, Oliver Moles (1984), an NIE staff member, has analyzed data from that study and from two other sources—NEA's Teacher Opinion Poll and the National Crime Surveys of the U.S. Department of Justice—to discern trends in school crime in more recent years. The statistics indicate that crimes in schools have not been on the rise, but have leveled off or even decreased.

NEA's annual Teacher Opinion Poll shows that problems of discipline and violence have been declining over the last few years. In 1979, over 74 percent of teachers said that discipline problems impaired their ability to teach effectively. In 1983, that number had dropped to 45 percent. In 1984, 68 percent of teachers expressed themselves as satisfied with student behavior in their classes, and an even higher number, 85 percent, said that their schools provided a safe and orderly environment.

The data from all these various studies and surveys give reason for some optimism about the state of discipline in the public schools. Whether the general public will come to share that optimism remains to be seen.

In Summary

In virtually every survey that measures the American people's attitudes about education in the public schools, a concern about discipline heads the list of problems the schools face. Although the actual figures fluctuate somewhat, approximately one person in four expresses this concern.

In spite of the coverage that actual crime—vandalism, assault, theft—has received in the media, few survey respondents actually mean that kind of discipline problem when they discuss the issue. Most see discipline as the maintenance of an orderly environment in which to learn, characterized by mutual respect between the adults and the students in the school. Most also feel that school discipline problems stem more from a lack of discipline in homes and from a lack of respect for law and authority throughout society than from specific school-related factors.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate the dimensions of the discipline problem in schools. In spite of the difficulty of collecting reliable data, it seems reasonably clear that crime in schools is not increasing by quantum leaps every semester. It seems rather to have stabilized and even, in some cases, to have decreased. The less readily measured aspects of discipline also seem to have improved: teachers express a fairly high degree of satisfaction about their students' behavior in class and about the school environment. The survey statistics themselves can also help put the issue in perspective. Lack of discipline has been mentioned as a serious problem by about 25 percent of respondents; that means that about three-quarters of the public generally does *not* see discipline as the major problem in their local public schools.

At the same time, it would be foolish to ignore the real dimensions of the school discipline issue. There are schools in which the atmosphere is not orderly and conducive to teaching and learning; there are schools in which a few troublemakers disrupt the learning of many other students; there are schools in which incidents of theft or violence leave many students afraid and unable to do their best work. To help ease the discipline problems that do exist, NEA recommends the establishment of uniform disciplinary codes, programs to address both the behavioral and learning problems of students, more professional counseling and support services, and more parental involvement.

21

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